

OPINION

FORUM

Schools need partners to confront gap

CONNECTICUT ranks relatively high in teacher quality and in educational attainment. Wealth and reforms over two decades — from higher salaries to the Beginning Educator Support and Training program — have helped. But student-achievement gaps by income and ethnicity remain unacceptable on the grade 10 CAPT test and grades 3-8 Connecticut Mastery Test, which soon will add science to the subjects assessed.

Recent news underscores what thousands of Connecticut's students and teachers face with the federal No Child Left Behind law due for reauthorization.

A federal judge dismissed three of the state's claims in its lawsuit over NCLB.

Test results revealed 36 percent of elementary and middle schools and 22 percent of high schools not making "adequate yearly progress" under NCLB.

Sept. 29 marked the deadline for states' revised teacher-quality plans. None yet meets the federal demand that all teachers be "highly qualified."

Schools can't confront this alone. Families, communities and students must focus more on learning. Expectations must be greater.

Certain schools — with necessary resources, leadership and teachers — are showing gains. This is true in urban, rural and suburban districts. The task is to make the successes typical.

Accountability matters, with standardized testing one measure. There are proposals to improve NCLB; for example, through more calibrated evaluations of performance of schools and by gauging academic growth of individuals.

Preparing and retaining qualified math and science teachers is one acute challenge. President Bush has called for more advanced placement teachers in those areas. The National Academies warn of a "gathering storm" in math and science, threatening U.S. competitiveness. The Connecticut Business & Industry Association and Regional Institute for the 21st Century perceive deficiencies in our work force, and point to the cities' role in the state's future. With such sectors as finance and technology at risk, economic vitality is an urgent concern, especially with an aging population and nearly half of our college graduates departing Connecticut.



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This is also a matter of justice, of equalizing opportunity and fulfilling human potential. Students need to cultivate curiosity and motivation. They need support and academic skills. Early literacy is essential. Solid early and out-of-school learning count. By high school, students should be on a college-prep trajectory.

Community collaborations can help. One, Connecticut State Scholars, was developed by the Connecticut Business & Industry Association with high schools, including Metropolitan Business and the Wilbur Cross Connecticut Scholars Academy in New Haven. It emphasizes a rigorous curriculum.

Teacher quality is crucial. Who enters and who stays in teaching, how teachers are assigned, prepared and rewarded are important. One ingredient is effective professional development, including sustained partnerships between universities and school districts.

School and university faculties can join in months-long seminars combining subject matter and pedagogy. Recent Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute seminars for New Haven teachers have featured Yale faculty members in history, anatomy, astronomy, ecology and mathematics.

The chairman of biomedical engineering led a seminar exploring related biology, chemistry and math. Teacher fellows published units on topics from insulin and diabetes to math applications of drug delivery. In an architecture seminar, a math teacher created a unit on geodesic domes; now he'll construct one with his students.

The goal is always to strengthen student learning through enriching collegial experiences for teachers.

We hope the institute can help draw additional accomplished and aspiring educators to New Haven. Teacher representatives are disseminating fellows work from the past year and planning seminars to meet their needs in 2007. With the Higher Education Act as well as No Child Left Behind due for reauthorization, this partnership approach reinforces teacher quality.

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